

NEST

TO THE

UP

STEPS

EIGHT

A STORY BY BROOKS KOHLER

CHAPTER 1

For how expensive it was, Barry's home on Madison Street was typical of the brown wood and brick bungalows traveling the sidewalks of inexpensive small towns. Eight steps led up to a large front porch where white wood pillars embracing long white railings propped up a sloping veranda producing a lasting shadow to cool wicker chairs for relaxing in the bright of day.

His daughter Alison, a teen with dreams of college, livened the porch with flowers. She placed the flowers in spots near the railings and on the steps. Those she had no place for she hung from the porch roof. When she asked her father for advice, he offered no more than to do what she would see fit, and it led her to begin a spring project that by summer blossomed into a flowerbed running the base of the porch.

In essence, Alison turned a house into a home with a cozy nook to read a book, while which alongside listening to jazz and pop records, her

favorite pastime. Inside the nook, she curled up with whatever her library offered. At night, the windows to the bungalow glowed a brilliant yellow as the sound of Alison's reading time livened the porch, the yard, and the sidewalk with the swirling sounds of trumpets and swinging saxophones.

From behind a well built 1950s writing desk, Barry spent his evenings grading papers and sipping tea. A professor at a nearby university, his life was one of podiums and papers. When Alison came walking into his study, he was in the process of pausing to reflect on whether or not he had successfully prepared the lecture he was to present for common hour.

"They're protesting again," announced Alison.

"What's it this time?" asked Barry. "The new paint pattern on the library doesn't compliment the trees?"

"Ha, ha. Real funny, Dad. You know your sarcasm doesn't compliment your education. Tell me again why Mom married you."

"It'd be easier to tell you why she left me,"

replied Barry, making a slashing ink strike on a paper.

Dejected, Alison walked to a couch and plopped onto it. Noticing the plop, Barry lowered his glasses to the tip of his nose and cast her a look.

“What you workin’ on?” asked Alison.

Barry’s eyes dropped to his paper. “History lecture. Massacre of St. Bartholomew. Have you studied it?”

“Sounds like the name of a band.”

“I’ll take that as no.”

“I’m thinking about going to that private school up north,” said Alison. “Think you might use your connections to get me in?”

“Why, so you can bad mouth education?”

“So you know, dear, sweet Father, I’m fully aware of what you think about the student activist movement.”

“That’s good because when I tell you I find it hypocritical to put down education while also wanting to get one, you won’t find it strange.”

“I find you strange, Dad.”

Slipping off his glasses, Barry glanced up at Alison. “Logical maybe, but strange, I doubt it. You have too much of your mother in you to find me strange.”

“So you think you can swing that?”

Dumbfounded and totally bereft of his daughter’s lack of knowledge on historical matters, Barry changed the subject. “How is it you don’t know about the Massacre of St. Bartholomew? Haven’t your history professors told you about it?”

“I know one who never did,” replied Alison, leaping up from the couch.

“Yes. You have a point,” agreed Barry.

“Good,” said Alison, turning to exit. “I’ll take your answer as a yes.”

CHAPTER 2

Beneath a canopy of trees near a large brick building housing the university History Department, Barry sat on a green park bench rummaging through a paper sack lunch while Helen, his friend from the Art Department watched with acute interest.

“Alison wants to go to Naton,” said Barry, shaking the sack.

“Impressive. My son thought of going there for pre-law but chose Harrison because some famous writer went there.”

“Yeah. Vilmer,” replied Barry. “He dropped out of college. He can’t miss a opportunity to brag that he did.”

“And now he’s on television,” added Helen.

“It’s an odd reality we live in,” commented Barry.

“How do you feel about Alison’s decision?”

“It’s a good school. Strong writing program. Her mother teaches there.”

“So what you’re saying is two out of three ain’t bad?”

Barry stopped fidgeting with the sack and looked up. “Eve’s as much a mystery to me now as she was the day she left.”

CHAPTER 3

A dining room table separated Barry and Alison by feet, he at one end and she at the opposite. As he sawed into his steak with a dull knife, he mentioned something that caught her attention.

“I called your mother today and informed her of your plans.”

“What did she say?”

“I told her you asked me to pull some strings.”

Alison jammed her fork into a bowl of leaf lettuce.

Barry looked up and gazed at her reaction.

“Why did you do that, Dad?”

“Because I wanted her to know you asked me. Is there a problem?”

“I never said that!” replied Alison, taking a quick sip of tea to conjure her resentment. “You’re putting words in my mouth.”

“You implied it,” said Barry, focusing on his steak.

“You know, I’m not wanting to go to Naton because Mom’s there. I’m wanting to go because they offer a class in poetry I’d like to take.”

“Can’t you get that here?” he asked.

“No. It’s a special class.”

“Seems expensive.”

“I’m the daughter of two university professors. I think you can manage.”

Barry stopped butchering his meal and relaxed. “Alison, has it ever occurred to you that if your friends in the student activist movement heard you, they might accuse you of being privileged?”

“Well, we’re not around them now.”

“No, and that is part of the problem,” he said, returning to his steak.

“Don’t do this, Dad.”

“Do what?”

“Don’t judge me based upon my immaturity.”

Barry acknowledged with a wave of his knife.

“That’s a bold admission, Alison.”

“Geeze, thanks.”

“What I’m trying to say to you,” continued Barry, “is if you’re going to be a leader, you need to be one at home.”

“You ever said that to Mom?”

“No,” she said it to me.

“Didn’t take her advice, did ya?”asked Alison, taking another sip of tea.

Barry paused, shook his head to reflect, and resumed carving a notch into a tough piece of meat.

CHAPTER 4

Naton University sat nested in a valley tucked between two high hills appearing tall enough to qualify for mountains. For those visiting the school, it was a mesmerizing sight to drive the hill's long, curvy climb through a dim tunnel made by shade trees and then to suddenly pop out at the top into sunlight to see an arched dome and gray studious roofs rising up through a canopy trees below.

Designed with a Gothic sentiment to produce an overpowering effect, everything about Naton reeked of social status. It boasted as past alumni of some of the most respected names in art, music, and writing, and yet it maintained a sense of class one peg less than universal snobbery.

The inside of Eve's office proved as much about Naton's stated goals as it did about the university's aesthetic appeal seen through a passing car window. It was more than basic lodgings for a professor. Her department office was the size of an efficiency apartment, minus the kitchen and bed,

and one might not be wrong for mistaking it for a well-to-do lawyer's office given the abundance of dark woods used to build the walls and bookshelves it contained.

As Eve scooped papers from a handcrafted wood desk and shoved them into a leather shoulder satchel, Barry leaned against the door frame admiring her ability to argue while at the same time retaining focus to pack.

"Stop acting like you're the only good parent, Barry. You have a career just like I do."

"Alison lives with me, Eve."

"And that's not my choice. She chose to live with you."

"Have you ever asked her why, Eve?"

"Yes, it's because she's finishing high school. It would be stupid for her to drive three hours each day to attend high school. Use your brain, Barry, or has teaching history for the past twenty years made you stupid?"

"Are you implying history is less a subject than needlepoint?"

“I’m impressed, Barry. You remember when we lived together.”

“I think of it as being married, Eve.”

With an eye on him, she slipped the strap of the satchel over her shoulder and hurried to the door. “I’ve got a class to teach.”

“Look, Eve. I didn’t come here to argue even though I feel like it might be the only time we ever truly are real with each other.”

“And there’s a reason that things meant to be forever don’t last. Walk and talk with me. I gotta get to class.”

“I came here to discuss Alison and her attraction to the student movement.”

“Ah, yes, the student movement. It seems I might recall a long-haired, bohemian named Barry I fell in love with who, too, was involved in student activism.”

“It was different then, Eve. We had a war to protest. We had crooked politicians. All Alison has is whatever her friends tell her not to like. She doesn’t look at the world the way you and I do.”

“Miss the good ole days of challenging me, Barry? ‘Cause I don’t. Now, get on with what you came to see me about or leave. I have a lecture to give in twenty minutes on a poet you never had time to read.”

“I’m tired, Eve. Do you ever get tired?”

“Barry, take some motherly advice. Lighten up. Let Alison discover the world the way you did. Want to be a good dad? Introduce her to your library.”

He slowed his stride to fall behind as Eve hurried off without looking back.

CHAPTER 5

Limp and bored, Alison stood next to her father, staring at the rows of books pampered against the walls of his study.

“Dad, what is this?”

“My books.”

“I know what they are, but why are you acting like it’s the first time I’ve seen them?”

“Because it might be. At least the way I do.”

“Okay.”

Rolling her eyes, Alison huffed off and reported to the couch where she found temporary comfort by lying back as if to nap.

“Those are my books from college,” said Barry, pointing to a shelf, “and those on the lower right are my books I acquired after college.”

“You’re organized, Dad. I’m impressed.”

“Well, I don’t know exactly when I bought them all, but I have a good idea of which ones I lugged around in my satchel.”

“Make sense, dad!”

“Your mother thinks I should introduce you to them.”

Alison leaned up. “That’s stupid. I’m going.”

“No, no, wait, Alison. Look, your mom’s one of the smartest women I know.”

“Then that explains why she left. I have homework to get to.”

“Now, hey! Listen to me. Just wait and listen to me for a few minutes, then you can run off, work on homework, or plan the revolution.”

“Make it fast.”

“These books are my life. They’re like old friends who don’t interrupt but listen.”

“Do they read themselves?” asked Alison, folding her arms to show impatience.

“No.”

“Then gone on with it!”

“Your mother wants me to introduce you to my books because she thinks it would be wise for you to read more.”

“Mom did not say that! She’s not that direct.”

“You’re right. She didn’t, but she suggested it.

I simply embellished it some.”

“Some?” questioned Alison, dropping her arms and rising from the couch to exit.

“More than a little,” replied Barry.

Alison spun around. “Then you were the originator of this idea.”

“No, your mother said that after I told her you don’t read.”

“Geeze!” exclaimed Alison, tossing her arms in the air. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Well, you don’t.”

“Not history books! I’m in high school!” shouted Alison, tapping her chest. “Not college!”

“Calm down.”

“I will when you make sense.”

Barry rubbed the back of his neck. “Okay, this is not going as I planned. I want you to be more connected to what your mother and I do.”

Walking to his writing desk, Barry sat.

“Why don’t you phrase it like, ‘I told your mother you don’t read, and she suggested this.’”

Barry grinned. “On those shelves you’ll see

lots of titles but some stand out.”

“You don’t read much fiction. Why?” asked Alison.

“I’ve thought about that question, too. I think anyone who enjoys collecting books asks themselves why they prefer one genre over the next.”

“I think you get bored easily,” said Alison.

“What makes you think that?”

“Mom.”

“She told you I get bored easily?” asked Barry.

Going to the bookshelf, Alison removed a title. Thumbing through its pages, she remarked with a librarian’s authoritative tone, “Nasty habit you got here. I never write in books.”

“Neither does your mother.”

“What’s the point in this again?” replied Alison, pushing the book back into its cavity.

“To introduce you to who I was before what I became.”

“And what are you now?”

“I’m old.”

She smiled. "Can I leave now?"

"Yes, I'm not forcing you to stay."

"Great."

CHAPTER 6

On the green park bench outside the History Department, Barry munched on a sandwich as Helen slurped broth from a cup of noodle soup.

“I showed Alison my books,” said Barry. “Eve suggested it.”

“A kind of therapy I take it.”

“No, maybe, I don’t really know,” he said, using a napkin to wipe his mouth. “I can’t figure Alison out.”

“She’s seventeen going on thirty. What’s there to figure out?” asked Helen. I gave up on trying to figure out my son when he came home from a week of surfing talking beach lingo akin to a hybrid foreign language.”

“Does he read?”

“All the time. He’s really into science fiction.”

“Alison reads nothing but fiction,” commented Barry.

“You sound like that’s a bad thing.”

“I wish she’d read more non.”

“Some kids don’t. I didn’t read it until I got into college.”

“I always read it,” added Barry. “So, too, did her mother.”

Helen chuckled. “You don’t see it, do you?”

“See what?”

“You don’t see that you’re trying to mold Alison into what you want her to be. Trust me, Barry, that doesn’t work.”

“Well, I want her to have nice things.”

“Her idea of nice things might be different from yours.” Rising from the bench, Helen stretched her arms wide and yawned out, “I gotta get back to class. Let her find herself.”

“What’s that mean?” asked Barry. “She’s seventeen years old! What’s there to find?”

“Herself,” replied Helen.

“She knows who she is!”

“Sounds like you don’t.”

Barry stood up and followed after Helen. “Hey, I’m not one of those fathers who doesn’t listen.”

“I never said you were, but I think you’re dismissing what she wants for what you do.”

“What do I want?”

“Perfection. And, Barry, you’re not perfect. Nobody is. We all have flaws.”

“She’s got a better chance than most.”

Helen slowed and turned to him. “Are you really that conceited? You think just because you and Eve are professors your daughter has better odds of success than less fortunate kids?”

“I like to think so.”

“Barry, my dad and mom never completed high school, and here I am, blessed to have an amazing position that I thank God to have. Be thankful for what you got, Barry. I need to get to class.”

CHAPTER 7

“This is a surprise,” said Barry, walking into his study.

At his desk, reading a book, was Alison.

I didn’t know Mom wrote a novel,” she said.

Barry’s eyes darted to the bookcase and the hollow spot where Eve’s book collected the dust of time. “Yeah, she wrote it when we lived in an efficiency apartment. She wrote a lot back then.”

“Explains why it reads all cozy.”

“The landlord controlled the heat,” commented Barry, setting his briefcase on the floor. “We nearly froze.”

“It’s interesting,” commented Alison. “Why didn’t she publish it?”

“She tried but nobody wanted it. I found it in the trash.”

“You have anything else she wrote.”

“No.”

“I tried writing a book once,” said Alison.

“Really? When?”

“When I was seven.”

“I don’t recall it,” said Barry.

“You were busy then with teaching.”

“What was it about?”

“Something stupid. Something like a kid would write. You got any news for me?” asked Alison, closing the book and perking up.

“Yes, I spoke with a friend. He won’t guarantee anything, but I’ll help you apply and maybe...”

“And maybe I’ll be going to Naton in the fall? Dad, this is amazing!”

Launching out from behind the desk, Alison threw the book onto Barry’s desk and rushed to embrace him. As she did, his eyes fell onto her mom’s book, alone and frozen in place like a beacon from the past.

CHAPTER 8

As night settled onto the bungalow, Barry found himself clinching the telephone in a nervous conversation with Eve. Her voice was clear, but his mind was not.

“I don’t have them, Barry,” she plead.

“Wish I could find them, Eve.”

Check the boxes in the basement. Her words echoed through his mind as he descended the steps down to the cool cavern below the house. *There’s some way in the back near rolled up rugs.* Barry aimed a flashlight like a searchlight until the beam lit up what he looked for. *If they’re anywhere, they’re there.”*

CHAPTER 9

With her back on a pillow propped against her bed's headboard, Alison sat in concentration, writing in a notebook. A knock near the door startled her. She looked up to see her father peeking in. In his hand he held an aged, yellow folder bulging with sheets of typing paper.

Leaning down, he dropped the envelope onto the floor and said, "From your mother."

CHAPTER 10

Alison entered her father's dimly lit study where she found him at his desk, grading papers as his reading glasses clung to his ears, close to sliding off the tip of his nose. Before him, inches from his face, a writing lamp arched over; it released just enough light to illuminate his work while everything around him faded into black.

"She writes about you," said Alison.

Barry looked up. Her barely visible form appeared to him like a haunting specter.

Coldly, he replied with, "Wasn't me. The guy in her stories is a guy she knew before we met. I think his name was Coolridge or Coolidge. His father was a diplomat or something."

Alison stepped back and flipped on the room's light switch. "They're pretty spicy."

"Yes, they had quite an affair," said Barry, rubbing his eyes due to the shock of the room's brilliant light.

"How's the grading?" asked Alison.

“It’s what it always is by this point in the semester. My A students are remaining consistent, my B and C students are holding steady, and I have two D students who are beginning to surprise me by writing papers fit for B students.”

“Sounds like they’re plagiarizing.”

“One might be,” commented Barry, “but the other, I’m not sure. Sometimes they begin to show progress late.”

“Does it bother you she wrote about him?” asked Alison.

“It didn’t bother me then nor now.”

Barry placed a graded paper on a stack of graded papers and reached for a new one to start the process over. As he did, he looked up. The room was empty.

CHAPTER 11

The squeak of the front door creaking open failed to startle Alison who sought security in her reading nest in the corner of the porch. Shadowed by night, she hid in the silence as her father stepped out.

“I should of known you didn’t care,” said Alison. “Most men would have thrown him out.”

Barry pushed the door shut behind him. “Some might call that love.”

“Some might call it cowardice.”

“Some might,” he agreed, “but I prefer to call it ‘saving face.’”

“Were you afraid of losing?”

Bury turned to her voice obscured by the dark.

“I’m not talking about Mom,” said Alison, scolding him. “I’m talking about your teaching job. I know how you prize it. Were you afraid if you fought a man for Mom you’d get arrested, go to trial, and lose your coveted Ivory Tower job?”

“You should write, Alison. That’s embellishment to an extreme level, and as far as the Ivory Tower goes, you don’t lose jobs at that level. They throw you out the tower window and watch you splat on the ground.”

“I’m serious!”

“I am, too!” he shouted back. “You’ve been pouting and throwing a fit over this idea you have of me and your mother having some happy, romantic, darling apartment romance that I or some man destroyed! Well, it didn’t happen that way. It was tough! Real tough. Toughness takes a toll!”

In the pause that followed, a dog barked.

“Great,” commented Alison. “Now, we’re a scene in a made for TV drama.”

“I’m not mad,” said Barry, walking to a banister to sit. “I’m trying to tell you that there was no need to fight for your mother because ours was a relationship built on trust. If she wanted to leave me, she could. All she had to do was get up and walk out the door.”

“And you wouldn’t care?”

“Oh, I’d care and probably take time doing what many men do when their wives leave them, but I’d survive somehow.”

“You’d just go on teaching, wouldn’t you?” question Alison.

“I’d go on doing what I had to do to survive,” replied Barry.

“Figures,” she said.

“Tell me, Alison. Your friends who want to change the world. How many of them depend on their parents for a roof, a bed, and a meal each night? People who have, typically don’t want, and those who want, have to figure out what it is to have.”

“What I want to know, Dad, is why did Mom leave you?”

“Ask her.”

“I can’t do that!” said Alison, defiantly raising her voice.

“Why not?”

“Because she’ll get mad.”

“She won’t get mad,” said Barry, rising up from the banister to return inside. “She’ll either give you a reason, or not.”

“What if she doesn’t?” asked Alison. “What if I leave as perplexed by her reply as I am with yours.”

“Then you’ll learn the art of patience because it is a virtue.”

CHAPTER 12

In an unannounced fury, Eve barged into Barry's shoe box size office in the History Department and cornered him with the question, "Can you tell me why our daughter asked me why I left you?"

From behind a cold metal desk covered in false wood, Barry replied, "She wanted to know, and I told her to ask."

"Why would you do that?" asked Eve.

"Because she's curious, and you have to admit, it's a good question." Barry relaxed in his chair. "I myself don't even truly know what happened to us."

"Oh, cut it out, Barry! We got bored with each other."

"Well, I doubt she'll buy that."

"Buy it?" questioned Eve. "Are we selling her a script? Barry, just tell her what happened. You had your pursuits. I had mine. I never left you. You left me."

Barry grinned. "You drove three hours to tell

me this?”

“Yes!”

“Well, you’re mistaken ‘cause I never left,” he replied, returning to his desk work.

“Oh, really? It seems I remember you leaving at dawn and coming home at dusk so tired you immediately rushed to bed.”

“I had a job,” he reminded.

“Yes, and so did I, taking care of Alison and finishing my classes!”

Barry peered up at her. “We share the responsibility of telling her we were lousy parents.”

She aimed her gaze at his. “Now, you’re being silly. We were not bad parents, Barry. We were young and preoccupied with ourselves.”

“Sounds like the definition of bad parents.”

“Sounds like we were in over our heads,” she argued.

“Whatever we were, Eve, it’s our responsibility to tell her.”

CHAPTER 13

It took Alison by surprise seeing her mother. Not one for random visits, Eve prided herself on making plans to arrive, but the urgency of the matter weighed heavy on her mind as she knew it did Alison's. As Alison sat on the couch, her parents chose to stand, Barry near the seldom used fireplace and her mother near a few family photos revealing happier times, or at least the semblance of.

"That makes no sense, Mom!"

"It's the truth, Alison. Believe me."

"You want me to believe that the man in the story doesn't mean anything to you."

"No, what I want you to understand is that my life is different now. So, too, is your father's. We're not in our twenties, Alison. We've grown emotionally."

"I don't understand. Why would you write that novel?"

"Well, I was told to."

"Told to?"

Alison turn to her father.

“It’s news to me,” said Barry. “First I ever heard of it.”

“Well, then I’ll explain,” continued Eve. “I had a friend who took a writing seminar. She said if I wanted to write a novel, I should write about something I know.”

“So you wrote about infidelity?” questioned Alison. “You just blurted all of that out there for the whole world to scrutinize?”

“How else was I to express my feelings and make a compelling book?”

Unfolding his arms and stepping away from the fireplace, Barry said, “Ladies, I have no idea what we’re discussing. I thought we were going to discuss your novel, Eve. I see this is another bad idea of ours, designed to fix a problem, but only makes it worse.”

“Barry, you’re not helping.”

“Of course, I’m not!” he shouted.

Moving back to the fireplace, he began to remove himself the best he could from the

cumbersome conversation.

“Dad, what is all this about?”

“It’s about your reading more into a book I wrote so long ago I forget I did,” said Eve.

“That’s even worse!” exclaimed Alison. “How can you forget you wrote that book?”

“Because it got rejected,” replied Eve, leaning forward and tapping at her chest to protest the persistent questions. “It was my first and last attempt to write anything fictive to submit to a publisher.”

“I remember that,” interjected Barry. “That’s why it was in the trash. She got the letter, got depressed, and pitched it.”

“And you dug it out,” said Eve. “Look at the trouble it’s caused, Barry.”

“I never planned on this,” he said. “You’re the one who told me to show her my books.”

“Yes, and you’re the idiot who put my book on display when it should be in the bottom of a trash pit beneath a million diapers.”

“Mom, Dad, I’m confused. Neither of you

cares. Where does that leave me?"

"You're the only one who does," said Eve.

Alison slouched. Eve went to her and sat to comfort.

"I think a part of me wishes it got published," said Alison. "I know it meant a lot to you."

"It did then, but not now."

Alison looked up at her father who stood staring off into space.

"How do you feel about it, Dad?"

"Oh," he broke free of himself, "you already know how I feel."

"Are you mad at me, Mom?"

"No, Alison. You're curious. When people are perplexed or worried about something, they get curious. It's a natural response."

"Well, I'm perplexed, Eve," said Barry. "Why did you save your stories when you tossed your novel?"

"I really don't know, Barry. Probably because some of them did get published."

"Published? Where?" asked Alison.

“Mostly university journals.”

“That would explain why most are essays,”
added Alison.

“I take it you didn’t read those,” said Eve.

“No, but I’ll get to them.”

CHAPTER 14

Eve pushed opened the front door to the house and stepped out onto the porch. Barry, following, closed the door.

“She ought to be a writer,” said Eve.

“I told her the same thing, and I expect in time she will.”

“About the poetry class, Barry. I know you called Stan about it. Why?”

“I didn’t want to put you on the spot,” he replied.

“That was kind of you, but I don’t mind Alison going to school at Naton.” Eve began down the porch’s steps and toward her car. “It’ll be nice to have her a around.”

“I’m sure it will,” said Barry.

Arriving at the sidewalk, Eve stopped and turned to face him. She leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

“I need to go.” She walked around the car to the driver’s side. “What are your plans for the

evening?" she asked.

"I'm going to grade papers. What's yours?"

Eve smirked, got into her car, and moments later she drove away. Barry stood, watching her leave; then he saw brake lights. Puzzled, he stepped out into the street.

Poking her head out the window she shouted, "Are you hungry?"

"I'm starved!" shouted Barry.

Eve backed the car to him and asked, "You wanna get a bite to eat?"

"Don't you have to be back at Naton?"

"It's Friday. No school tomorrow."

"Oh, that's right," said Barry. "We have weekends. I get so busy I forget."

"Hush, Barry, can I stay in the guest room?"

"We don't have one."

"Can I sleep on the couch?"

Barry laughed.

THE END

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